

Updike's 'Sundays' shouldn't be ignored

A Month of Sundays by John Updike. Published by Alfred A. Knopf, New York, N.Y. \$6.95.

John Updike is a writer who seems to be ignored by a large part of the college population. Few know of his rueful sense of humor, his sensitive, observant, elegant prose and the ultimate power of his books—not a bolt of truth, but something that worms its way underneath the skin, from time to time enveloping our intellectual nerve endings.

It is hard to understand how such a fine writer could be brushed aside in favor of some of the flashy but unsatisfying work that seems to command our attention. And it isn't because Updike's books are not provocative; sex as an important part of our life's discomfort and our life's design is a theme Updike has pursued explicitly since the publication of his novel *Couples*.

Picture of the times

Perhaps it is because he does not seem to be of our generation, or because his characters are always older than we are. Yet his work such as *Rabbit Redux*, present a picture of our times which is hard to equal, even in the works of younger writers.

Updike's latest novel, *A Month of Sundays*, involves a minister who is sent by his bishop to the desert to recuperate and repent because he has been philandering with several of the women in the congregation. Instead of being defrocked, he is placed far away from the seed of temptation. Part of his therapy involves writing a recount of his experiences that were his religious downfall as a clergyman and as a man. It is an expanded confession of his life—his relationship with an unresponsive wife, the burden of his profession which he did not always bear and the interludes of sensuality for which there is an inevitable price. It is a type of parable, and like all good parables, it includes a healthy amount of guilt, uncertainty and pain.

Faith is not the center of the book, yet the clergyman wonders abstractly about it while he speaks to the congregation in his mind:

Empathy for Jesus

"Let us become Jesus for these moments. Let us seek empathy with the Son of God who, as He was truly man, and who underwent the crucifixion in uncertainty and dread, must have conceived of this mad prank, of looking for money in the mouth of a random fish, with some dubiousness; yet it worked. Or imagine yourself Him when, in His first miracle, His powers green and unproven, He bid the servants to fill the waterpots with water to the brim and bear them unto the governor of the feast. Suppose the water had not become wine but still proved, in the governors' mouth, water? That would be comedy too, but of a different kind; a grim and pratfallen kind—our mortal kind."

Our mortal kind is what the pastor knows, both within himself and in the people he preaches to and pities. Let us empathy with him, he asks, and ultimately with ourselves.

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footnotes

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